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USIA FOR NEA - RUGH

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SUBJECT: ISLAM AT THE JIHAD CONVENTION

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: WHILE ISLAM WAS A CENTRAL SUBJECT AT LAST WEEK'S JIHAD CONVENTION IN RIYADH, DISCUSSIONS GENERALLY REPEATED THE SAME POINTS EMPHASIZED BY SAUDI RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES SINCE LAST AUGUST. THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT, AND ESPECIALLY THE BAATH PARTY, WERE ROUNDLY CONDEMNED BY ALL SPEAKERS, ALTHOUGH ONLY A FEW HAD SPECIFIC COMMENTS ABOUT SADDAM HUSSEIN. ALL SPEAKERS ALSO HAD STRONG PRAISE FOR THE AL SAUD AND THE COALITION EFFORT, AND ALL LISTED THE NUMEROUS REWARDS FOR THOSE WHO WAGED OR SUPPORTED JIHAD. THE ONLY CONTROVERSIAL MOMENT CAME WHEN AN ANONYMOUS WRITTEN COMMENT SUGGESTED THAT MOST ISLAMIC SCHOLARS IN OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES SUPPORT SADDAM. AFTER ONE SHEIKH TRIED TO BLAME JEALOUSY OF SAUDI WEALTH AND IRAQI PROPAGANDA FOR SUCH SUPPORT, TWO SENIOR SAUDI RELIGIOUS LEADERS ARGUED STRONGLY THAT MOST SCHOLARS IN OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES IN FACT SUPPORT SAUDI ARABIA. NONETHELESS, THE STYLE AND SUBSTANCE OF DISCUSSION SEEMED TO REFLECT UNITED SUPPORT FOR SAG POSITIONS ON THE GULF CRISIS. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) ALMOST ANY LARGE MEETING IN SAUDI ARABIA WILL INVOKE ISLAM AS A PRINCIPLE THEME, AND THE RECENT JIHAD CONVENTION AT RIYADH'S IMAM MOHAMED BIN SAUD ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY WAS NO EXCEPTION. AS EXPECTED, ALL SESSIONS AND SPEAKERS MENTIONED THE PROPERLY ISLAMIC NATURE OF THE KINGDOM'S CURRENT JIHAD. COMMENT: IT IS WORTH RECALLING THAT, WHILE JIHAD IS USUALLY TRANSLATED AS "HOLY WAR," ITS MORE LITERAL MEANING IS THAT OF "STRUGGLE." AMONG MANY SUNNI POPULATIONS, ESPECIALLY THE CONSERVATIVE WAHHABI CIRCLES OF SAUDI ARABIA, JIHAD CAN ALSO DESCRIBE THE EFFORTS OF MUSLIMS TO FOLLOW ISLAM DURING A PARTICULARLY TRYING TIME OR SITUATION. BOTH THESE RELATED USES OF JIHAD WERE IN EVIDENCE THROUGHOUT THE CONVENTION. END COMMENT.

¶3. (U) THE MOST DIRECT COMMENTS ON ISLAM WERE MADE DURING A PANEL DISCUSSION ENTITLED "JIHAD IN THE GULF IS A DEFENSE OF RELIGION AND THE HOLY PLACES." THREE SENIOR MEMBERS OF THE SUPREME COUNCIL OF RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS (ULEMA) WERE ON THE PANEL: SHEIKH SALEH BIN MOHAMMAD AL-LEHEIDAN, SHEIKH ABDULAZIZ BIN ABDULLAH AL ASH-SHEIKH, AND SHEIKH SALEH BIN FAWZAN AL-FAWZAN. OTHER PARTICIPANTS INCLUDED: SHEIKH MANNA AL-QAHTAN, A NATURALIZED SAUDI FROM SYRIA; KUWAITI SHEIKH AHMAD AL-QAHTAN (NO RELATION TO MANNA), ONE OF THE BEST-KNOWN RELIGIOUS SPEAKERS IN THE GULF REGION; SHEIKH MOHAMMED ABDALLAH AS-SUBAYYEL, DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE MINISTRY OF HAJJ AND ENDOWMENTS' DEPARTMENT FOR AFFAIRS OF THE TWO HOLY MOSQUES; AND DR. ABDALLAH BIN MOHAMED AL-AJLAN OF THE IMAM MOHAMED UNIVERSITY FACULTY. ANOTHER FACULTY MEMBER, DR. RASHED BIN RAJHI AL-RAJHI, SERVED AS MODERATOR. NUMEROUS OTHER RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE IN THE AUDIENCE, INCLUDING UNIVERSITY RECTOR DR. ABDALLAH BIN ABDULMOHSEN AL-TURKI AND SENIOR SAUDI RELIGIOUS SCHOLAR ABDULAZIZ BIN ABDALLAH BIN BAZ.

¶4. (U) THE THREE SUPREME COUNCIL MEMBERS STRESSED THE SAME THEMES THAT THEY HAVE IN VIRTUALLY ALL THEIR PUBLIC APPEARANCES SINCE LAST AUGUST. ALL WERE QUICK TO CRITICIZE THE "EVIL" IRAQI ACTIONS IN BOTH IRAQ AND KUWAIT SINCE THE INVASION, GENERALLY PLACING BLAME FOR ALL PROBLEMS WITH THE "ATHEIST" BAATH PARTY AND ONLY

OCCASIONNALLY MENTIONING KUWAIT OR SADDAM. AS-SUBAYYEL REMINDED THE AUDIENCE SEVERAL TIMES THAT JIHAD IS FOUGHT NOT ONLY THROUGH ACTION BUT THROUGH DEED AND THOUGHT AS WELL. AL-LEHEIDAN, WHOSE PERIODIC APPEARANCES ON SAUDI TV AND RADIO SINCE AUGUST HAVE BEEN WELL-RECEIVED, WAS ATYPICALLY GENERAL IN HIS REMARKS, STRESSING THE REWARDS FOR THOSE WHO BECOME MARTYRS DURING JIHAD. AL ASH-SHEIKH POINTED OUT THAT THE IRAQI BAATHISTS HAD ACHIEVED WHAT THE CHRISTIANS AND JEWS NEVER COULD: THE "DISINTEGRATION" OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD. OTHER SWEEPING CONDEMNATIONS WERE MADE OF SOCIALISM AND PAN-ARABISM, AND SOME SPEAKERS (NOTABLY DR. AL-AJLAN) STRESSED THE NEED FOR A REUNIFICATION OF ALL THE MUSLIM NATIONS.

15. (U) THE BEST-RECEIVED OF THE SPEAKERS WAS UNQUESTIONABLY SHEIKH AHMED AL-QAHTAN OF KUWAIT. LIKE HIS FIRE-AND-BRIMSTONE TAPES CIRCULATED THROUGHOUT THE GULF STATES, AL-QAHTAN WAS MUCH LOUDER, MORE FORCEFUL AND DIRECT THAN HIS SAUDI COLLEAGUES. HE SAID THE AFGHANS AND PALESTINIANS WERE THE MAIN VICTIMS OF SADDAM AND THAT ISRAEL WOULD BE THE ONLY WINNER OF THE WAR. HE SAID ISRAEL HAD RECEIVED SUBSTANTIAL AID FROM THE U.S., GERMANY, AND JAPAN SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE CRISIS, AND CONTRASTED THAT SUPPORT TO THE LOST SIXTEEN MILLION DOLLARS A MONTH THAT THE PALESTINIANS USED TO RECEIVE FROM SAUDI ARABIA. AL-QAHTAN CONCLUDED WITH A STATEMENT HE SAID WAS MADE BY KING ABDULAZIZ AL SAUD IN 1933: "I DO NOT FEAR THE FOREIGNERS AS I FEAR THE MUSLIMS BECAUSE OUR PROBLEMS WILL COME FROM THE MUSLIMS."

16. (U) ENSUING COMMENTARY FROM THE FLOOR OF THE CONVENTION WAS MADE BY VARIOUS FOREIGN GUESTS WHO REPEATEDLY PRAISED THE AL SAUD IN GENERAL AND KING FAHD IN PARTICULAR. ONE SUDANESE DELEGATE PRAISED KING ABDULAZIZ FOR "CIVILIZING THE BEDOUIN" BY TEACHING THEM MODERN WAYS, A COMMENT NOT WELCOMED BY THE TRADITIONALLY-MINDED AUDIENCE. ANOTHER SOURCE OF DISCOMFORT FOR THE CONSERVATIVES ATTENDING WAS THE ASSERTION BY EGYPTIAN PROFESSOR DR. MUSTAFA ASH-SHAKA THAT THE CURRENT PROBLEM WAS NOT WITH SADDAM BUT WITH THE PROCESS WHICH BROUGHT SADDAM TO POWER. HE SAID THAT SIMILAR MEN WOULD RISE TO POWER IF PRINCIPLES OF "CONSULTATION" (SHURA) WERE NOT IMPLEMENTED THROUGHOUT THE MUSLIM WORLD.

17. (U) AFTERWARDS, WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED ANONYMOUSLY FROM THE AUDIENCE WERE READ, WITH ANSWERS PROVIDED BY PANEL MEMBERS. ONE QUESTION ASKED FOR AN EXPLANATION OF THE PRO-SADDAM POSITION TAKEN BY MOST ULEMA OUTSIDE SAUDI ARABIA. AFTER AS-SUBAYYEL ATTRIBUTED SUCH POSITIONS TO TRICKERY BY SADDAM OR ENVY OF SAUDI WEALTH, DR. AL-TURKI INTERRUPTED TO SAY THAT MOST ULEMA OUTSIDE THE KINGDOM IN FACT DID NOT SUPPORT SADDAM. HE ASCRIBED REPORTS OF ANTI-SAUDI FEELING IN OTHER COUNTRIES TO WESTERN MEDIA DISTORTIONS AND TO THE PRO-SADDAM POSITION TAKEN BY SOME GOVERNMENTS IN THE REGION. SHEIKH BIN BAZ ALSO DENIED THE PREMISE OF THE QUESTION, SAYING THAT HE DAILY RECEIVED CABLES FROM ULEMA ALL OVER THE WORLD IN SUPPORT OF SAUDI POSITIONS AND ACTIVITIES. BIN BAZ REPEATED THE RELIGIOUS JUSTIFICATION FOR MUSLIMS TO SEEK THE ASSISTANCE OF NON-MUSLIMS FOR A JIHAD.

18. (U) OTHER SESSIONS OF THE CONFERENCE REPEATED MANY OF THE POINTS MENTIONED ABOVE, TYING THEM INTO THE TOPIC AT HAND. AMONG THE MORE IMAGINATIVE ARGUMENTS WAS A CLAIM THAT BAATH PARTY FOUNDER MICHEL AFLAQ WAS A JEW; THEREFORE, SAID THE SPEAKER, THE BAATH PARTY WAS ONE OF THE GREATEST DANGERS CURRENTLY FACING THE MUSLIM WORLD. OTHERS WERE MORE CIRCUMSPECT IN THEIR CRITICISMS, GENERALLY ARGUING THAT SADDAM'S WAR HAS DISTRACTED THE MUSLIMS FROM OTHER PROBLEMS FACED BY MUSLIMS IN AFGHANISTAN OR THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES.

19. (C) COMMENT: THE SLIGHTLY CONTROVERSIAL MOMENTS DESCRIBED ABOVE WERE NOT PARTICULARLY EXTREME AND, LIKE THE ENTIRE CONVENTION, ARE MOST NOTEWORTHY IN THAT THEY HAPPENED AT ALL. THE COMMENTS BY THE EGYPTIAN AND SUDANESE DELEGATES SHOW THAT FOREIGNERS WERE NOT

PROHIBITED FROM SPEAKING THEIR MINDS, ALTHOUGH THE PROFESSOR CAREFULLY AVOIDED USING THE WORD "DEMOCRACY" IN HIS TALK. IN MOST OTHER WAYS, THOUGH, THE DISCUSSION WAS TYPICALLY SAUDI, WITH QURANIC INVECTIVE MIXED AMONG CALLS FOR MUSLIM STEADFASTNESS IN THE MODERN WORLD (SOMETIMES WITH CORRESPONDING CALLS TO OPPOSE ZIONISM AND IMPERIALISM).

¶10. (C) OF SOMEWHAT GREATER INTEREST WAS THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS FIGURES AT THE CONVENTION, ESPECIALLY BETWEEN THOSE ON THE PANEL AND BIN BAZ. UNLIKE THE PANEL OF MEDIA FIGURES (REPORTED SEPTTEL), MEMBERS OF THE RELIGIOUS PANEL NEVER OPENLY DISAGREED WITH ONE ANOTHER. AT MOST, THEY RAISED SUPPLEMENTAL POINTS THROUGH THE USE OF SOMEWHAT NEBULOUS ANALOGIES OR QURANIC REFERENCES. BIN BAZ RECEIVED FAR MORE RESPECT THAN ANYONE ELSE IN THE AUDITORIUM, SOMETIMES INTERRUPTING TO ADD AN ADDITIONAL QURANIC REFERENCE AND SOMETIMES BEING CALLED ON BY THE MODERATOR FOR COMMENTARY. BOTH THE MODERATOR AND THE PANEL REFERRED TO BIN BAZ AS "OUR FATHER" (WALIDNA) AND WERE ALWAYS READY WITH EFFUSIVE PRAISE FOR POINTS RAISED BY THE SENIOR SHEIKH.

FREEMAN